

**The Colony as an eighteenth-century utopian *locus*.
An approach to James Burgh's *An Account of The First Settlement,
Laws, Forms of Government, and Police of The Cessares,
A People of South America***

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Modernity was undoubtedly a time of quest and discovery, both in geographical and epistemological terms. It was also a time of hope and belief in human's ability to accomplish whatever goals were he aimed at. The new scientific development in different fields of knowledge, with its emphasis on mathematical accuracy and experimental approach, echoed the physical courage and expertise of the discoverers who swept the seas in search of new lands and continents. Despite the unavoidable drawbacks, the loss of lives and the navigational failures, coupled with scientific errors and unsuccessful projects, optimism prevailed. People truly believed they would be able to understand the world and seize it to their own advantage. Moreover, in so doing they would supposedly improve their material living conditions and, in particular, they would grow intellectually and spiritually, because of their more profound understanding of our earthly — human and otherwise — actual and potential richness, or of the Creator's divine plan.

According to Isaiah Berlin (2001: 81-90), the basic assumption prevalent in Modernity is a common belief, or ideal among scientists, philosophers and other sages of the time, in a unified system of all sciences, both in the humanities and the sciences of nature, the logical outcome of the great triumphs of the natural sciences in the seventeenth and the eighteenth-centuries western culture. So, the goals then pursued were ultimately the same everywhere: truth and light; it was only error that presented itself in myriad forms. In his own words, 'this has been the programme of Enlightenment; and it has played a decisive role in the social, legal and technological organization of our world'. (Berlin 2001: 82). However, as he points out:

This was perhaps bound sooner or later to provoke a reaction from those who felt that constructions of reason and science, of a single all-embracing system, whether it claimed to explain the nature of things, or to go further and dictate, in the light of this, what one should do and be and believe, were in some way constricting — an obstacle to their own vision of the world, chains on their imagination or feeling or will, a barrier, to spiritual or political liberty. (Berlin 2001: 82)

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We must bear in mind that Berlin was considering the decline of the Enlightenment and its optimistic, or, more often than not, the so called arrogant attitude towards any obstacle to human progress and the advent of a more liberating and individualistic perspective of humankind and of the world order with the forthcoming manifesto of the Romanticism. Nevertheless, his view can also apply to the paradox of utopian projects. On the one hand, they all avow their utmost wish to free the world, at least as they know it, of its evils and failures, and offer a more promising alternative, a road to happiness for every man, and, in some cases, every woman. On the other hand, in so doing, their projects imply, almost inevitably, an authoritative source of command and surveillance, thus enforcing the annulment of individuality and freedom, in some degree. However, uniformity, and stagnation either only political or political and educational, scientific and technological, or even religious hold sway in its stead.

The emergence of the new empires in tandem with the discovery of new continents and new opportunities for men to settle and change their fates for the better was fully under way in the seventeenth century, especially in what the Portuguese, Spanish, and English maritime enterprises were concerned. This meant the imposition of the European political and economic models, either in an informal or formal way, on the newly found or appropriated lands in the far-off regions these peoples sailed to. The settlers, on their part, built colonies, developed agricultural and commercial activities which generated wealth — for themselves as well as for their homeland through the payment of charters and taxes — under the expected protection of the overseas metropolitan state power. Yet, as Darwin highlights, the often called first British Empire, roughly from the early seventeenth to the 60's of the next century, when the American Revolution took place, was rather loose as far as political and administrative structures were concerned:

From almost the very beginning, the colonial societies created by emigration from the British Isles enjoyed considerable freedom to frame the customs and rules that best suited their interests. The successive attempts under Cromwell, Charles II, and James II to impose a more centralized system and assert more direct authority in the affairs of the colonies were half-hearted at best: the Revolution Settlement of 1689 effectively killed them. What followed was the age of "salutary neglect" that lasted into the 1760s. London appointed the colonial governors but was content to leave them to their own devices in the face of elected local assemblies, whose grip on finance and executive power grew steadily stronger. (Darwin 2008: 4)

The other striking note on the development of this newly-formed British Empire (the Portuguese and Spanish cases being entirely different) is that it originated in several scattered private enterprises and seldom in projects of government initiative. Even considering that commercial and financial targets would be shared by both the metropolitan empowered entities and the colonists, the means and methods adopted by each group were significantly divergent, and sometimes,

as history well showed, would be on opposite sides. In addition, besides those whose jobs were in the navy or in some way connected with maritime companies, emigrating groups can easily be identified by the motives that made them leave their motherland, political and religious dissention being the obvious ones. As Darwin goes on stating:

The result was a political culture markedly different from that in Britain where the influence of court, the growth of the fiscal-military state, and the social grip of the landed aristocracy were a far more powerful check on radical or popular tendencies in politics than anything that existed in the mainland colonies of English America. Symptomatic of this, from London's point of view, was the grudging and truculent response of the colonies to its requests for money and manpower in the American campaigns of the Seven Years War (1756-63). After the war, when British governments at home looked for ways of sharing the huge burden of debt that victory had brought with those whom they saw as its colonial beneficiaries, American resentment at imperial interference, the threat of imperial taxation, and the closer regulation of trade produced the explosion that wrecked the First British Empire. (Darwin 2008: 4)

Utopias, as representations of ideal states, in line with the Morean proposal, although apparently dissociated from the historical time and space parameters, bear the capacity to envisage social, economic and, therefore, political solutions ahead of their time. More's work was clearly an intellectual, humanist game which experimented with uncommon responses to well-known problems current in sixteenth-century England. In this way, the fact that the information about the ideal commonwealth of Utopia is, seemingly, the outcome of a transatlantic voyage performed by Amerigo Vespucci and his fictional companion and Utopia narrator, Raphael Hythloday, a Portuguese sailor, proves the significant role of the Atlantic voyages in the imaginings of the time. Thus the discoverers' tales of adventures and wonders they saw in the exotic regions their ships touched became part and parcel of the fantasised path to a utopian country. It stands to reason, then, that the rise of distant colonies presented the opportunity to experiment with better and happier solutions for life in society. John Locke, the political mastermind of the constitutional model of monarchy, in his *Two Treatises on Government*, repeatedly refers to America as the laboratory of humankind's experiment for the construction of a fairer commonwealth.

Thus, if one thinks of the convergence between the intellectual enlightened attitude in relation to man's ability to better his living conditions and the geopolitical modifications brought about by the recently founded, but still growing, empires with all their inevitable problems and dissentions, it comes as no surprise that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed a vast production of utopian texts. *An Account of The First Settlement, Laws, Forms of Government, and Police of The Cessares, A People of South America*, written by James Burgh in 1764, stands out as one among the numerous utopias published in England during this period, some

anonymously, others penned by well known literary figures, eager, each of them, to suggest the perfect response to every issue society was confronted with.

An Account of the Cessaes was published as a series of letters, very much in tune with the fashionable epistolary form used in novels such as Richardson's. These letters were addressed to Mr. Vander Zeer, in Amsterdam, and apparently written by Mr. Vander Neck, an explorer who, having sailed to the East Indies, kept a journal of his travels of which an English translation came to press in 1601. How the author came into the possession of the letters 'imports the public little to know', assures Burgh in his Preface (1994: 73). The proof of the existence of the Dutch traveller vouches for the narrator's reliability and, consequently, prompts the prospective reader to accept the information contained in these letters as equally reliable. Moreover, the reasons which forced a wide group of men and women to leave their homeland and face the unknown in order to settle in a remote land are consistent with well established historical facts, namely the torture and death of thousands of Protestants during the religious persecutions in the Netherlands led by the duke of Alba, the Spanish governor designated by Philip II in 1567 (Burgh 1994: 76-77). Alongside these persecutions, there was the fear of retaliation of the English Puritans after the Restoration in 1660, especially because of Charles' II sympathy towards the Catholic faith, and the subsequent voyage of the Pilgrim Fathers and other groups that followed suit towards the American coast and the foundation of the first colonies there.

Besides the probable recurrence of religiously caused violence, other motives encouraged them to face such an uncertain future. What they most wanted was to avoid a second-rate life in terms of participation in the public sphere, both in economic and political affairs, a fate that, under the current law, befell every citizen who, in Britain, was not a member of the Anglican Church, and in the Low Countries, was not a Catholic. This was, of course, also the common lot of a great number of men and women who, though religiously integrated in their communities, did not belong either to the aristocracy or to the wealthy middle classes. So, on account of either religious discrimination or of exclusion, a trait deeply ingrained in the social hierarchy, people were desperately poor and lacked any possibility of really improving their station in life. Sailing for the new continent offered them a chance to start afresh:

(...) we had another end in view, noble, generous, and disinterested in itself; which was the relieving a few honest, sober, and industrious families, who were in great poverty and distress, and the providing for them and their posterity a comfortable subsistence, under such a form of Government, as would be productive of the most beneficial and salutary consequences to every individual. (Burgh 1994: 77)

As Mr. Neck significantly states, moving a significant number of families from their native land to a new, unknown, place would not suffice to procure them a happier and safer life they all wished for. A new form of government, a different

social structure and a fairer economy was of the utmost importance. On this matter the signee of the letters first enunciates the superior goal of this new community:

As the safety and happiness of the whole nation ought to be the great end and design of every government, so we endeavoured to keep this grand object always in view, and not to aggrandize one set of men, to the prejudice and detriment of the rest. All men are considered as brethren, united together in one band, to promote the common good. (Burgh: 1994: 87)

This ideological statement, as well as much of the constitutional structure here proposed by Mr. Neck, reflects, of course, the political radicalism Burgh defended and tried to spread throughout his life among his fellowmen. This was, in fact, the very spirit underpinning the American Revolution, as we can see in its almost absolute consonance with the well known right 'to the pursuit of happiness' registered in the American Declaration of 1776:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

As would happen in America, the country of the Cessares was provided with a Constitution, prepared by Mr. Neck and his friend, Mr. Alphen, and later approved and signed by an assembly made up of those who were about to sail. This general assembly also elected Mr. Alphen as governor of their future homeland, Mr. Neck and three more citizens as senators, and yet another six as inspectors. Lastly they ratified the two ministers previously chosen by Alphen and Neck.

Again, the defense of a more egalitarian society is patent in the balanced distribution of land among its inhabitants. Depending on the quality of the soil, each married man received a share of thirty five to fifty acres, and single men a half of it (Burgh: 1994: 104). The emphasis on the agricultural labour and production to the detriment of industry or commerce, which were considered noxious to the spiritual health of the collectivity, also shows the prevalent hegemonic notion of wealth as synonymous with landowning, either individually or collectively. At the same time, the more recent productive activities associated with the emergent capitalist system were strongly underrated. These views essentially coincided with those held by the French economic school of Physiocracy (etymologically the rule of nature), propounded by theorists such as du Quesnay, the French Minister of Economy under Louis XVI famous for his *Tableau Économique* (1758), or Turgot, author of works such as *Réflexions sur la formation et la distribution des richesses* (1766) and *Lettres sur la liberté de commerce des grains* (1770), but very badly received by the *Ancien Régime*.

The notion of brotherhood and the focus on the common good, also included in the definition of the above mentioned new society's main goals, not only reiterate the Christian principles of charity and piety, very much cherished by the Reformed

Church, but also pre-announce the notion of the secularized principle of solidarity as advanced by the French Revolutionaries of 1789.

In spite of the careful planning of the voyage, the difficult choice of their destiny, the complex organisation of the supplies to meet the needs to survive for two years, such as food or readymade wooden houses, they still suffered serious drawbacks. The shipwreck of one of the vessels with all its human and material contents, besides driving them away from their planned route, was a severe test on their faith in the future. However, at the end of the day, their optimism did prevail. In due time, parishes were built, each twenty five making a county with its town in the middle. Their capital, Salem, was also built according to plan with streets geometrically drawn, each with its name written in large letters at the corners, and the houses, 'neat and plain, and exactly of the same form and size, which makes an agreeable uniformity...' (Burgh 1994: 122) The utopian teleological drive is thus obvious in every measure of this orderly commonwealth. The same may be said of the constitutional division of power according to Montesquieu's triad: the executive power in the hands of only one man, named the governor, the legislative, a collective of persons called senators elected by the citizens by ballot, and the judicial held by the elected magistrates. The relevance given to justice is closely intertwined with that of social equity as far as public responsibility, both for the offender and the victim, is concerned, and supports the inherent harmony of the whole commonwealth.

All this is the obvious result of the strong cohesion among the members of the newly-born society. The glue which keeps them in such a fraternal union is the Constitution they swore to and, undoubtedly, also their religious bond. The fact that they belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church and had to fight hard for their right to follow their faith against every obstacle, lent them a kind of *esprit de corps*, albeit tainted with a profound intolerance towards Catholics.

However, the main reason for such deep ties among the members of the Cessares society results from the almost eugenic procedure of selecting 150 families and 200 orphans to sail to Patagonia. Their character and professional skills were weighed together with their religious and political motivation. Later, their Spartan ways of living, deprived of luxury and vice, their strict moral code and strong reliance on the betterment and redemptive force of hard work kept them in physical and spiritual union and granted them, at least in their own eyes, the identity of a 'chosen people'. In Neck's emotional words:

Vice and idleness are carefully discouraged; virtue and industry are made fashionable, and generosity and probity are the only steps to honour among us. (Burgh: 1994: 128)

This 'flourishing colony', as Necks calls the country of the Cessares also draws its deep sense of community from its geographical and political isolation. No communication is held between them and any metropolitan power, and anyone who tries to do otherwise will be condemned for high treason:

Whoever shall endeavour to destroy the liberties of the people, and the constitution of the state; or shall discover to our enemies, the passages which lead to our country, shall be put to death as a traytor, even though he were the governor himself (Burgh 1994: 113)

The secrecy concerning the precise location of the country of the Cessares — ‘a retired and uninhabited place on the western side of Patagonia’ (Burgh 1994: 86) —, a place of good climate, air, and soil, but of difficult access and easily fortified (Burgh 1994: 84), fulfills the utopian *sine qua non* condition of isolation and self-supporting capacity, while highlighting one of the major concern of the times, the wars of conquest and colonial dominion:

But we had disclosed the particular place to very few of our associates, lest it should be publicly known, and our enemies should be acquainted with it, who would not fail to lay wait for us in our voyage, or to attack us immediately on our arrival there, before we could possibly fortify ourselves. (Burgh 1994: 84)

The very name of this commonwealth, the country of *Cessares* also posits interesting questions. Is it a corrupted form of *Caesars*, the all powerful lords of the Roman Empire, thus meaning that its ‘happy people’ living in such a ‘happy state’ (Burgh 1994: 129) are equal to the ancient emperors with their achievements and well adjusted pattern of life? Or is the author playing with the Latin verb *cessare* — to rest, to stop after one’s mission is accomplished? These two hypotheses seem logical and highly probable in the context, because they are consistent with the purposefulness and religious faith of these settlers, the *Cessares*. If so, they had arrived at their earthly Paradise, and all this would indeed be an appropriate closure for their Diaspora.

It is, of course, very tempting to read utopia as an acquired objective, discarding any effort to improve on what is already perfect. However, if we take into consideration Bloch’s notion of ‘concrete utopia’ as a proposal of future in order to go beyond the failures and errors of reality, utopia becomes an important tool of progress. As Ruth Levitas explains: ‘For Bloch the unfinished nature of reality locates concrete utopia as a possible future within the real; and while it may be anticipated as a subjective experience, it also has objective status;’ (Levitas 1990: 89). This anticipatory capacity of utopia is obvious, for instance, in their condemnation of slavery, or of cruelty towards animals (Burgh 1994: 116, 112).

Burgh’s active radicalism, widely recognized because of his *opus magnum*, *Political Disquisitions* (1774), expresses itself in his utopian work in terms of his desire for a revolutionary change. Desire and hope, the essential ingredients of utopia, were found in those new territories, the colonies, which represented the chance to transform a ‘possible future’ into a present of new free nations propelled by the militant optimists of the Enlightenment:

And if ever we should be known to the world, let us be known as a wise nation, the condemners of riches, the avowed enemies to luxury, the dread of tyrants, and the guardians and preservers of liberty. (Burgh 1994: 129)

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